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**TRUSTING THE PROCESS? ANXIETY-PROVOKING
SITUATIONS AS CHALLENGES TO THE SYMBOLIZATION
AND PROCESSING OF EXPERIENCE IN PERSON-CENTERED
GROUPS**

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TRUSTING THE PROCESS? ANXIETY-PROVOKING SITUATIONS AS CHALLENGES TO THE SYMBOLIZATION AND PROCESSING OF EXPERIENCE IN PERSON-CENTERED GROUPS**Abstract**

The person-centered approach lacks a coherent theory of groups. Drawing on Rogers' theories of personality and therapy and his writing on group work, as well as on the works of Gendlin, Warner and others, this paper examines the group facilitator's task in relation to the members' symbolization and processing of experience. Groups can present anxiety-provoking situations where members may feel temporarily overwhelmed in the face of feedback and confrontation which challenges their self-concept, resulting in confusion, stress, flooding or shutdown. In these situations their normal capacities for processing may falter and members can experience a degree of 'fragile process.' The facilitator's responsibility, it is suggested, is to actively support the development of a cohesive group climate characterized by the core conditions wherein members will engage with one another in a constructive and facilitative manner, to assist (when needed) in affect regulation, and to help provide an optimal reflective environment in which members can symbolize and process their experiencing optimally.

(159 words)

INTRODUCTION

The person-centered approach, it has been suggested, lacks a specific group theory to shape the facilitator's understanding or to help guide their actions (Lietaer & Dierick, 1996; Missiaen, 2002). Coulson, for example, believes that “[s]earching for a theory of client-centered group therapy per se is a futile exercise” as Rogers’ theory of facilitation “does not differ in any fundamental philosophical way from his approach to individual therapy” (1981, p. 10). Indeed, while Rogers outlined some tentative hypotheses on resolving group conflict in his early writing (1959), he avoided developing any abstract theory in his later best-selling book on encounter groups, admitting that he found it practically impossible to write any general guidance for facilitators and offering instead his naturalistic observations of the group process and descriptions of his personal style and preferences (1970a).

In the absence of an explicit person-centered group theory, opinions and perspectives on facilitation (including whether to even have formal facilitation) have varied considerably, and there has been divergence on many issues, such as whether or not there are any significant differences between encounter and therapy groups (Embleton Tudor, Keemar, Tudor, Valentine, & Worrall, 2004). Few, however, could disagree with the observation that the literature places “little emphasis on the specificity of group therapy. The principles of individual client-centered psychotherapy are applied ‘with little revision’ to working with groups ...[and] little is said about specific tasks and interventions of the group therapist” (Lietaer & Dierick, 1996, pp. 564-565). Consequently the person-centered facilitator (whether of intensive encounter groups, weekly therapy groups, or large community groups) lacks a coherent underlying theory to guide their actions and relationships with members, beyond employing the core conditions and the oft-

repeated mantra '*trust the process*', believing this necessary and sufficient to start a constructive developmental process in the group (Meador, 1975; Rogers, 1970a).

In this paper I will argue that the theoretical concepts of symbolization and processing of experience are crucial to person-centered theory and I will consider the implications of these concepts for group work, focusing specifically on facilitator tasks.

THE PROCESSING OF EXPERIENCE AS A CENTRAL THEORETICAL TENET

Symbolization refers to the capacity to recognize and identify feelings and experiences in awareness; to discover "*the words or other symbols that most accurately and completely describe [our] internal experiencing*" (Tudor & Worrall, 2006, p. 16). According to Rogers, 'conditions of worth' introjected from significant others can result in aspects of our experience being denied (i.e. not symbolized) or distorted (i.e. inaccurately symbolized) to awareness due to the threat they represent to our self-concept (1951). However, the 'necessary and sufficient' therapeutic conditions, including psychological contact, therapist congruence, and communication of empathic understanding and acceptance, provide an optimal, threat-free relational environment in which the client can begin to accurately symbolize, accept and integrate the previously denied or distorted aspects of their organismic experiencing (ibid.).

Influenced by his early collaborations with Gendlin and others, in the mid-1950s Rogers began examining what happens in the client as a result of receiving the necessary and sufficient conditions. He outlined the client's resulting movement along what he called a 'process scale' or continuum (Rogers, 1958, 1970b) from a "*rigid, static, undifferentiated, unfeeling, impersonal*

type of psychologic functioning” towards a way of being characterized by “*changingness, fluidity, richly differentiated reactions, by immediate experiencing of personal feelings, which are deeply owned and accepted*” (Rogers, 1970b, p. 195). So while the necessary and sufficient conditions describe the therapist’s or facilitator’s attitudes and responses, the process scale defines the client’s corresponding side of the ‘process equation’ - as a result of receiving the conditions the client becomes increasingly: able to symbolize their experience accurately; able to differentiate their feelings; open to their direct sensory and visceral experiencing, using it as a trustworthy inner referent; able to live ‘in process’ rather than according to static constructs, and open or congruent in relation to self and others (Rogers, 1970b). In other words, the core conditions provide an optimal relational processing environment in which the client can accurately symbolize and differentiate their experience, consequently moving towards greater congruence.

Subsequent authors, most notably Gendlin (1970) and Warner (2009), have taken issue with the Freudian assumptions underpinning Rogers’ concept of denial of experience (i.e. repression from awareness so that it becomes ‘unconscious’) and the way he talks as if experience was comprised of fully formed, static objects or contents of the mind. They offer alternative ‘process’ theories which avoid reifying the ‘self’ or ‘experience’ and which place greater emphasis on the dynamic interaction of experiencing and symbolization.

Gendlin (1970, 1996) has been a seminal figure, influencing Rogers and helping set the scene for later experiential approaches. He argues that, as a result of attending inwardly, the individual can use their ‘felt sense’ – an experiential bodily referent – to ‘carry forward’ their experiencing.

Given sufficient space, time, and inward attention in the presence of a non-intrusive but attentive other, and as a result of moving our awareness between the felt sense itself and concepts or symbols intended to represent the felt sense (i.e. ‘focusing’), our experiencing can unfold to reveal a variety of implicit meanings.

Warner (2009, 2013), influenced by Rogers and Gendlin as well as by attachment theory, proposes that conditions of worth are not the only source of incongruence; she suggests that overwhelming stress, poor early attachment, trauma, neglect, and developmental or physiological issues can also disturb “*the ability to hold experience in attention ... the ability to moderate the intensity of experience[and] the ability to take in a viewpoint outside of one’s own frame of reference without the sense that one’s own experience has been annihilated*” (2009, pp. 119-120). However, the person can develop their inherent but potentially unrealized capacities to symbolize and process their experience in a relationship characterized by the core conditions which stays close to the individual’s direct experiencing and meanings (i.e. their frame of reference).

I do not have sufficient space to examine the concepts of symbolization, differentiation and processing of experiencing more fully in this paper. Interested readers are pointed to the sources already cited, as well as the contributions of Rice, Greenberg and colleagues (Greenberg, Rice, & Elliott, 1993; Rice, 1984; Rice & Greenberg, 1984), Watson (2011), and others from the experiential and information-processing approaches (Klein, Mathieu-Coughlan, & Kiesler, 1986; Wexler, 1974). Suffice to say that the accurate symbolization, differentiation and processing of experiencing is a central tenet of person-centered therapies across the many ‘tribes’ of our

approach, from ‘classical’ to experiential, and that particular therapist attitudes, qualities and styles of interaction (particularly the provision of the ‘necessary and sufficient’ conditions) are seen as facilitative of the clients’ inherent processing capacities. But what might our theories of symbolization and processing mean for group facilitation?

GROUPS: A CHALLENGE TO SYMBOLIZATION AND PROCESSING?

Rogers believed that individuals could only symbolize their experience accurately when there was a ‘complete absence’ of threat to the self-concept, such as is provided by the necessary and sufficient therapeutic conditions in one-to-one therapy, or when alone (1951). However, this complete absence of threat seems highly unlikely in the group context: unstructured nondirective groups are typically uneasy and uncomfortable, particularly in their early phases, with participants experiencing heightened confusion, anxiety and distress (c.f. Mountford, 2001; Schmid & O'Hara, 2007; Wood, 2008). Struggles to develop group norms for behavior usually ensue, with resulting conflicts between the members (Beck, 1981; Braaten, 1974/1975). In addition, the members’ first expressions of real emotion following the initial, polite ‘milling around’ phase are often of anger (Rogers, 1970a). As the group develops, members typically offer and receive feedback regarding how they come across to each other; feedback some are very likely to find challenging or threatening to their self-concepts: *“The hail-fellow-well-met finds that others resent his exaggerated friendliness. The executive who weighs his words carefully and speaks with heavy precision may discover for the first time that others regard him as stuffy. A woman who shows a somewhat excessive desire to be of help to others is told in no uncertain terms that some group members do not want her for a mother”* (Rogers, 1970a, p. 30). On occasion this feedback may even take the form of a ‘violent’ verbal confrontation (ibid.).

Rogers' theory would suggest that group members' symbolization and processing of their experiencing may become understandably difficult, if not entirely impossible, in a potentially fraught situation such as this!

Person-centered group facilitators are also faced with a paradox: the attitudes and responses of others are the original source of our distress and incongruence as well as its potential cure (Rogers, 1951). There therefore seems little initial reason to trust that group members will necessarily be accepting, empathic and/or congruent in the manner required for their peers to symbolize and process optimally: indeed, as their individual anxiety and incongruence may be high, it is perhaps understandable that members might instead be attacking, judgmental and defensive, creating or reinforcing conditions of worth for each other (Mountford, 2001), engaging in 'factions' (Barrett-Lennard, 1979) and scapegoating (Beck, 1981) or alternatively, become anxious and frightened, 'freezing' or withdrawing from each another and consequently losing psychological contact.

While Rogers (1970a) proposes that a psychologically safe, empathic and acceptant group climate enables constructive therapeutic change to occur, "[t]he group environment is not always friendly. At times, it may even be threatening" (Wood, 2008, p. 42). Indeed, as Bebout says: "[i]n a group one is open to attack from many sides; there is no initial guarantee that other members are there to be empathic, supportive, and insightful confidants. In a group context it becomes more difficult to realize that vulnerable, groping process of self-search and truth-seeking that is characteristic of and nurtured in good one-to-one therapy relationships" (1974, p. 406). Bebout makes a very important and often overlooked point in this last sentence – in a

group it can be particularly difficult for members to focus on the edge of their awareness, where vulnerable feelings or unclear, as-yet-unsymbolized experiencing might exist. Purton, writing from a focusing-oriented position, agrees, suggesting that “*groups undoubtedly provide a challenging context for maintaining one’s connection with one’s own experiencing in the face, sometimes, of a barrage of other people’s responses and different ways of seeing things*” (2004, p. 140).

The notion that unstructured groups might present their members with difficulties in symbolizing and processing finds further potential support in Warner (2006), who states that ‘*high levels of stress*’ can ‘*temporarily overwhelm*’ the normal capacity of the person to process experience, noting that individuals can experience varying degrees of ‘fragile process’ around the “*newer edges of their experience that have not previously been received by themselves or others*” (p. 12). As fragile process is described as difficulty holding experiencing in awareness, moderating the felt intensity of experience, and hearing the views and perspectives of others without feeling one’s own experience is annihilated, it follows that groups might occasionally provide a challenging context in which to symbolize and process these ‘newer edges’ of experiencing!

SYMBOLIZING AND PROCESSING: THE GROUP FACILITATOR’S TASKS

The symbolization and processing of experiencing appear as central tenets in the various forms of person-centered therapy, but it appears that these normal human capacities can be made particularly difficult in groups, especially in the earliest stages where anxiety and overwhelm prevail, where members’ individual incongruence is high, or at especially fraught moments of confrontation and feedback. What might this mean for the members and facilitators of person-

centered groups? In the following sections I consider some implications, describing the facilitator's tasks and drawing on relevant theory and research to illustrate key points.

The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions in the Group

As previously discussed, Rogers' necessary and sufficient conditions provide a safe relational environment for the processing of previously unsymbolized or distorted experiencing. However, while it is the therapist's attitudes which create this optimal environment for the client in one-to-one therapy, in the group context it is the attitudes and behaviors of the group members toward one another that are both more central and more important, at least if it is to be a 'group' experience rather than merely 'one-to-one therapy with an audience' (c.f. Braaten, 1999; Clark & Culbert, 1965). Therefore, although the facilitator's core conditions may be **necessary**, in a group they are not **sufficient** as the interaction of the members takes precedence over the actions and attitudes of the facilitator (Bakali, Wilberg, Hagtvet, & Lorentzen, 2010; Dies, 1983). In order then for the members to best symbolize and process their experiencing, a facilitative environment characterized by the 'necessary and sufficient' conditions must develop between the group members. But how does this come about when, as we have seen, the group may at times demonstrate anxiety, hostility, subgrouping, overwhelm, withdrawal and scapegoating?

Rogers (1970a) believed that, given a 'reasonably facilitating climate' characterized by the therapeutic conditions, some group members would demonstrate a 'natural' and 'spontaneous' capacity to be caring, helpful and facilitative, consequently helping to create '*a psychological climate of safety*' (p. 7) through which 'defensive rigidity' could be reduced. The facilitator's attitudes and behaviors were thought to play an important role in establishing and supporting a climate within which the helpful capacities of the group members could emerge (Meador, 1975),

but Rogers nonetheless placed considerable trust in the participants to find their own direction and their facilitative potentials, due to his faith in the actualizing tendency (i.e. 'trusting the process').

My own view is that, if the group is to be successful, the facilitator does indeed need to entrust the members with the provision of the therapeutic facilitative conditions to one another, so that they become the 'therapists' (Hobbs, 1951). However I would also argue that this is a developmental process requiring time (which can be in relatively short supply in weekend intensive encounter groups or time-limited therapy groups) and I believe members will find it particularly difficult to extend the necessary and sufficient conditions when their own anxiety, defensiveness and incongruence are high, potentially leading to a vicious cycle of attack, confusion, anxiety and retreat instead of a climate of increasing psychological safety and trust.

Consequently I agree with Mente, who suggests that the facilitator's central task is to actively support the members to demonstrate their empathic understanding toward one another (Gieseckus & Mente, 1986; Mente, 1990). Mente uses a number of methods, including information and explanation, to encourage group members to be empathically understanding of one another from an early stage. He has found that those members who offer empathy to others not only provide a facilitative environment for their peers, they also demonstrate significantly greater personal development; an interesting finding further supported by two early studies which discovered that the members of nondirective groups who were facilitative of others also evidenced the greatest personal gains (Gorlow, Hoch, & Telschow, 1952; Peres, 1947).

The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions in Relation to Group Cohesion

The members' necessary and sufficient conditions, particularly their empathic understanding and acceptance, undoubtedly provide a facilitative symbolizing and processing environment in the group, but they also help substantially in the creation and maintenance of a cohesive group climate; something now generally accepted as essential for a group to function effectively (Braaten, 1989, 1991; Burlingame, Fuhrman, & Johnson, 2001). While group cohesion is often inadequately defined, it relates to the attraction and attachment the members feel toward the group, and it is positively associated with successful outcome, with members' willingness to disclose personal material and, importantly, with their capacity to tolerate conflict in the group (Burlingame et al., 2001). I suggest that members' empathic acceptance helps create a supportive, facilitative environment wherein interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges can more easily be processed when they occur, consequently increasing members' sense of being part of a cohesive and effective working group and instigating a virtuous cycle of maximal support and maximal constructive challenge.

Non-Directivity, Structure and a Processing Environment

The group facilitator will occasionally need to exercise some degree of management or 'executive function' if a cohesive group atmosphere conducive to symbolization and processing is to be effectively established and maintained between the members (c.f. Braaten, 1991; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). As Lietaer and Dierick (1996) note, this is an issue which has been insufficiently discussed in the literature, probably because many person-centered facilitators associate structure or attempts to influence the group culture with undesirable directivity.

However, if it is the case, as I believe, that "*the foremost task of a group therapist [is] to create a well-functioning group*" in which the interactions of the group members are the 'nuclear event' (Lietaer & Dierick, 1996, p. 569), then the aim of effective person-centered facilitation is to help the members to develop and maintain a suitably cohesive climate characterized by the necessary and sufficient conditions, as only in such a climate or atmosphere will members be able to effectively symbolize and process their experiencing. While the creation of this climate is, in part, a normal developmental process which takes time (c.f. Beck, 1981; Rogers, 1970a), I believe a degree of facilitator structuring or intervention is occasionally necessary in order to support the group members in this endeavor. We have seen, for example, how Mente actively encourages group members to demonstrate their empathic understanding of one another, but other person-centered facilitators have also been known to offer members 'groundrules' regarding participation (e.g. Gendlin & Beebe, 1968), and even classical practitioners such as Brodley and Merry have offered 'guidelines' to participants (e.g. avoiding use of 'blaming language') "*in an effort to help people make better use of the opportunities for personal development that groups provide, and to minimize the risk of inadvertent 'threat, hurt or insult'*" (Merry, 2002, p. 166). Providing members with advance information or guidelines about the nature of unstructured person-centered groups and the need to listen respectfully to peers is one example of relatively light-touch structuring or 'executive function' which may help reduce group anxiety, assist cohesion and help facilitate an optimal processing environment characterized by the therapeutic conditions. Similarly, the facilitator can assist in the development and maintenance of this climate by establishing a clear working contract with the group, clarifying expectations from the outset and as the group progresses.

The facilitator must also intervene if the members' anxiety, hostility, subgrouping and/or withdrawal are significantly and/or persistently impeding the capacities of the group members to be in psychological contact, to communicate with one another in an empathically acceptant and congruent manner, or are threatening to seriously damage group cohesion. While conflict is a normal part of the development of a healthy group and some degree of it must be expected and accepted as the group grows (Beck, 1981; Rogers, 1970a), the facilitator also needs to be willing to support members "*against too much attack*" (Gendlin & Beebe, 1968, p. 195) if their symbolization and processing capacities are to be maintained (see below for further information). Ideally it will be the group members who respond empathically to their peers in situations of conflict or overwhelm rather than the facilitator, so the facilitator's first course of action should therefore be to wait and see how the members deal with the situation. If then necessary the facilitator should encourage and support the members to respond to one another, for example by inviting quieter members of the group to offer their responses to what is happening. If group members are still unwilling or unable to respond to one another because they are completely frozen with anxiety and/or have lost psychological contact, the facilitator may intervene directly in order to ensure everyone feels empathically understood. Alternatively the facilitator might actively encourage members to unfold the 'relational rupture' which has occurred: helping them to explore what happened and to understand their own reactions while also listening to others' perspectives (Elliott, 2007).

These facilitator interventions are intended to re-establish group cohesion and support a group environment characterized by the 'necessary and sufficient conditions'. However, facilitators should intervene only sparingly as "*group leader activity correlates with outcome in a*

curvilinear fashion (too much or too little activity leads to unsuccessful outcomes). Too little leader activity results in a floundering group. Too much activation by a leader results in a dependent group that persists in looking to the leader to supply too much.” (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005, p. 164).

Affect Regulation, Anxiety and Processing

Individuals need to be able to hold their experiencing in attention at a workable level of intensity if they are to symbolize and process their experiencing (Leijssen, 1998; Warner, 2006; Watson, 2011). However, in situations of particular stress, such as during group conflict or challenging feedback, a person’s normal capacities for processing may be overwhelmed, at least temporarily, resulting in flooding or shutdown. This has several implications for person-centered group work.

Firstly, facilitators and group members must not confuse an intense emotional experience with a constructive or therapeutic one: these are not necessarily the same thing (Gendlin, 1996; Wood, 2008; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Intense emotional experiences – especially those which members experience as threatening or anxiety-provoking– are particularly likely to increase members’ difficulty focusing inwardly and symbolizing their experiencing, at least temporarily. While the members’ innate processing capacities may return when the immediate threat has passed or the group has finished, research points to a strong curvilinear relationship between anxiety and outcome: too little anxiety and the group is lifeless, too much and it simply cannot function (Braaten, 1979, 1989). The facilitator should therefore monitor the intensity and anxiety of the group, keeping an eye on participants for signs of overwhelm, ‘fragile process’ and/or shutdown

and, where necessary, using their ‘executive function’ to help maintain an optimal level of intensity required to symbolize experiencing in the group.

This optimal workable level of intensity has sometimes been written about using the metaphors of ‘distance’ (Leijssen, 1998), heat and/or space. Missiaen (2002) perhaps comes closest to my own position in his paper on person-centered groups: he argues that the group facilitator should help the members to maintain an ‘intrapsychic space’ with sufficient distance between self and experiencing so that participants can ‘focus’ on what is happening for them, and an ‘interpsychic space’ related to the way the members interact with one another. So a facilitator might, for example, encourage the members to slow down and notice what is happening inside themselves during moments of conflict (facilitating intrapsychic space), or remind a member overwhelmed during a barrage of feedback of their right to ask for some time (facilitating interpsychic space).

Other examples of the need to moderate the intensity of the group experience can be found in relation to the giving and receiving of interpersonal feedback: while Rogers acknowledged that feedback which challenges the self-concept can cause distress, he believed that *“so long as these various bits of information are fed back in the context of a caring which is developing in the group, they seem highly constructive”* (1970a, p. 30), a position which further supports the need to establish a cohesive and empathically accepting environment if interpersonal challenges are to be faced constructively (see above). However, Rogers also paid careful attention to the individual members’ levels of distress and actively encouraged them to state when they had had enough (1970a), consequently facilitating the group members in moderating the felt intensity of their experience. Coulson took a similar position, saying: *“In some cases, if the person receiving*

feedback appears to be overwhelmed by the process, the leader should allow the person to break emotional contact by acknowledging the fact that they may need to withdraw from the encounter” (1981, p. 17).

Anxiety and intensity, then, are like Goldilock’s porridge: there seems to be an optimal level which is neither ‘too hot’ nor ‘too cold’ but ‘just right’! Beyond this optimal level some group members may become overwhelmed, with diminishing capacity to process their experiencing. Of course the individual members may not all share the same ‘optimal level’ of processing but, as I have discussed in the sections above, where there is challenge there is an increased need for cohesion, processing space, empathy and acceptance, and some members may need their peers or the facilitator (utilizing their ‘executive function’) to intervene. This is important because ‘input overload’, overstimulation and being ‘attacked’ or rejected by peers are all associated with greater likelihood of members dropping out of or deteriorating in encounter groups (Lieberman, Yalom, & Miles, 1973).

Developing a Reflective Cycle of Experiencing and Symbolization in Groups

While I believe that the group atmosphere or climate is equivalent to the therapeutic relationship in one-to-one therapy (c.f. Braaten, 1991), there are important differences between individual therapy and group work. If group members are to be able to accurately symbolize what is happening both within and between them then there should be sufficient focusing ‘space’ and time in a suitably cohesive and facilitative climate (i.e. the necessary and sufficient conditions) to enable this to happen. The facilitator may occasionally intervene to assist group members in the development and maintenance of such a climate. Additionally, I agree with Yalom and Leszcz

that “*group members must experience one another with as much spontaneity and honesty as possible, and they must also reflect back on that experience. This reflecting back, this **self-reflective loop**, is crucial if an emotional experience is to be transformed into a therapeutic one*” (2005, p. 30, emphasis in original). Translating this into person-centered language and concepts, I suggest that the group members must have an experience of encounter in the group, and must then be able to reflect on that experience, attempting to symbolize it for themselves both individually and collectively.

Shlien (2003) is one of the very few person-centered authorities who talks specifically of symbolization in and by the group. He believes members will attempt to symbolize their experience, trying to find ways to understand what is happening both within and between them which can be collectively shared, talked about, thought about and understood, albeit that there will always be a degree to which the group’s symbolizations will not exactly match the experiencing of each individual member. Lewis (1985) takes a similar position, arguing that members must collectively symbolize their shared experiences in and of the group before they will be able to progress through the stages of group development: “*At the group level, members must come together in turning their attention toward an aspect of their experience together. Jointly, they must become focused on a problem area, guided by a feeling sense that something important is there, of which they need to have a more adequate understanding and grasp. Each member plays a role in forming an adequate and shared perception of the problem toward which the group is turned*” (p. 31). This is an intriguing perspective which suggests the group members collectively turn their attention to their shared ‘felt sense’ of something problematic in their

group dynamic, attempting to symbolize this accurately so they can ‘process’ effectively and consequently move to successive stages of development.

In previous sections I discussed some of the general issues which support a facilitative atmosphere in which members can more accurately symbolize their individual experiencing (e.g. the necessary and sufficient conditions in the group, optimal psychological and interpersonal space, and affect regulation), but the facilitator can also assist the members to symbolize their collective experience by helping them turn their attention from here-and-now experience and interaction towards reflection or commentary on the group process (c.f. Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), for example by asking the members: “what is your sense of how the group is today?” or “how do you understand what just happened?” It is generally preferable to encourage the members to make process comments about the group experience rather than to offer these directly, as too many facilitator comments can make the group self-conscious and stilted (Rogers, 1970a), but the facilitator also needs to be aware that some issues can be too ‘hot’ or threatening for members to raise or address without risking attack (e.g. subgroups). In these situations the facilitator may need to be the one to name these if the group is to remain a safe, cohesive processing space (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005).

While the issue of symbolization in person-centered groups has generally been little discussed, Dierick and Lietaer discovered that their group members had found ‘*Starting to think about*’ (1990, p. 748) or ‘*Eliciting awareness by an event in the group*’ (2008, p. 215) helpful, which perhaps lends some research support to this under-explored concept.

I want to make one final point regarding the symbolization and processing of experience in person-centered groups: Rogers (1970a) did not distinguish between therapy and encounter groups and was not in favor of an intake assessment or interview, suggesting that the only entrance requirement should be that the prospective member '*is a person*'. However, members who rate lower on the process or experiencing scales can find it more difficult to make productive use of the group context (Gendlin, Beebe, Cassens, Klein, & Oberlander, 1968; Meador, 1975). Consequently I believe it may indeed be helpful to distinguish between therapy groups and encounter groups: people with an externalized locus of evaluation and high degrees of incongruence and 'fragile process' might be more suited to a supportive therapy group actively facilitated by a therapist carefully attuned to processing issues than to the potentially overwhelming rough-and-tumble of an unstructured non-directive encounter group with a diverse membership. Some form of intake interview may therefore be appropriate to help the prospective member and facilitator evaluate whether the type of group on offer is likely to be of benefit, and whether individual therapy is a preferable alternative or addition to the group experience. Indeed it seems that facilitators change their facilitative interventions and behavior depending on the membership of the group and its purpose (e.g. for students' personal development during counseling training, or for therapy with potentially vulnerable clients): Lietaer and Dierick (1996) found that client-centered therapists appeared to offer greater structure and more 'steering' in therapy groups with vulnerable clients compared to encounter groups for student counselors.

GROUPS: A PROCESSING-ORIENTED APPROACH

To summarize: our current theory of symbolization and processing would suggest that a group, if it is to be successful, must develop a caring, empathic and accepting climate in which there is a workable intensity of feeling as well as sufficient focusing 'space' to symbolize what is happening within and between the group members. A good level of group cohesion ensures that interpersonal challenges can be processed constructively, rather than instigating a cycle of hostility, resentment and withdrawal. While it is a function of the members' actualizing tendencies that they can process spontaneously given the right facilitative climate, the facilitator should, where necessary, assist in the development and maintenance of this climate by encouraging and supporting members in their attempts both to honestly encounter one another and to offer the necessary and sufficient conditions in their relationships.

The facilitator should understand the group as moving through developmental phases (Beck, 1981), some of which will inevitably involve conflict, and they must be moderate in the level of management, structuring or intervention they offer, so as not to deprive the group members of the opportunity to exercise their own potentials to assist, support and challenge one another. However at the same time the facilitator must attend to potential overwhelm, fragile process, or avoidance, providing opportunities where necessary to moderate the intensity of experiencing, and to attempt to re-establish group cohesion, empathy and acceptance between the members when the group itself is overwhelmed.

I believe that this way of understanding the person-centered facilitator's task has much in common with the findings of Lieberman, Yalom and colleagues (Lieberman et al., 1973; Yalom

& Leszcz, 2005) who discovered that high levels of facilitator caring and ‘meaning attribution’ (i.e. attempts to understand what is happening in the group), and moderate levels of emotional stimulation and management (which they call ‘executive function’) correlate with successful group outcomes: facilitators who offered too little or too much ‘executive function’ and too little or too much intensity or stimulation had less successful outcomes. Interested readers are encouraged to read their valuable and interesting work.

This paper is obviously only an initial and incomplete attempt to outline the implications of a processing-oriented perspective for the facilitation of person-centered and experiential groups. There is much I have not been able to cover, and brevity no doubt oversimplifies and makes these proposals sound like simple or straightforward tasks. I recognize that they are not – the group facilitator must constantly be making decisions about their own optimal distance from the group – when to intervene and when to leave the group members to discover and exercise their own potentials. However, I hope I have offered some useful ways of thinking about the facilitator’s task in relation to our theories of symbolization and processing of experiencing, especially during moments of high anxiety.

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